RUSSIAN LITERATURE

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LECTURER IN RUSSIAN

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By J. A. Joffe, Lecturer in Russian

In the Pantheon of Literature the writers of Russia have been accorded, within the last thirty years, a niche by the side of the supreme heaven-dwellers of that temple. The phenomenon is all the more remarkable when one remembers that it is practically within this brief period, about a generation and a half, roughly speaking, that the outside nations have made the acquaintance of Russian Literature.

The hold it laid upon the non-Russian reading public was instantaneous, firm, and persistent. Foreign observers of literary phenomena were amazed at its sudden sweep and force. One of its greatest admirers (Ferdinand Brunetière) records that for a time matters threatened to reach a point when the well-known yellow-covered volume in the hands of a Frenchman could be almost safely assumed to be the work of one of the chief Russian novelists, — such was the vogue of the conquering barbarians.

Are these Russians "barbarians or are they saints"? — those were exactly the words used by French critics in attempting to fathom the causes of the sudden tide of interest in Russian Literature in France. The critics were seized with the impression that Russian authors did not merely write novels, but celebrated mass as it were, with the "why and wherefore" ever present in all they wrote. There was a strange fascination in the "new gospel" these writers were preaching. In their works new horizons and a new world were being opened to the astonished gaze of their Western European readers.

Was this unprecedented success the result of a mere whim of literary taste among the jaded and volatile Frenchmen? Its persistence and its rapid conquest of the reading public throughout the world preclude a negative answer to our question.

It was the new world, both of men and of emotions, into which the foreign reader was introduced, and it was the new spiritual attitude of the Russian writers that supplied the real cause of the conquering march of Russian Literature.

What are the peculiar traits that exercised such a potent influence on the foreigner? A more or less satisfactory answer can be given only when a thorough examination is made of the country and the people that produced this Literature. Have they not grown trite, these dicta that "Literature is the mirror of the spiritual life of a nation," that "the literary history of a nation is the history of the nation's psychology," etc.?

Geographically, Russia (European, I mean chiefly) is one vast plain with hardly an elevation within its confines. It has a negligible length of seacoast (particularly navigable for a considerable part of the year) and several sluggish, if majestic, rivers. Thus, while presenting practically no natural barrier to foreign incursions, Russia, on the other hand, has enjoyed the advantage of easy communication among the various tribal and racial elements that composed it. For centuries, it is true, such relations were far from amicable, yet the fact stands that intercourse was free and easily achieved. Again, the absence of mountain barriers on the North placed no obstacle in the way of the icy winds from the Arctic Sea, and though the southernmost regions of Russia, such as the Crimea and Caucasus, may be a land of olives and oranges, there is unbroken winter with permanent snow-roads and sleighs and sleighbells for several months even in the South, following upon the scorching heat of summer. And this contrast in temperature has tended but to make the Russian physique more rugged and inured to hardships.

Ethnologically, the ancient Slavs were longheads, while the various Finnish and Mongolian races were chiefly of the broadhead type. At present the Russians present both types, with the intermediate mesocephalic form, and they are darker of eye and hair than might be gathered from descriptions in classical and medieval authors.

The history of Russia is usually dated from 862, when, tired of continuous squabbles and wars, the natives of Novgorod in the North called a Norse tribe, the Russ, "to come and rule, for our land is great and abundant, but order it has none." In time the bold Viking princes sailed down the Dnieper (where the capital, Kieff, was situated), and even stood at the gates of Constantinople, which they left after collecting rich tribute. From Byzantium the Russian prince Vladimir introduced Christianity (985), after refusing the overtures of Mohammedan missionaries because of their opposition to the use of spirituous liquors, as "the joy of the Russians is [in] drinking." Under the Byzantine priesthood, monasteries were founded, schools established, a primitive Literature (liturgical, patristic, and annalistic) chiefly of translations, but at times original as well, sprang up; the common law was codified, and intercourse and even intermarriage with the ruling houses of Western Europe grew up during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The Slavic system of dividing up principalities among all the sons and bestowing the chief authority on the oldest in the house, *i.e.* seniority of the brothers over the sons of the deceased, split up Russia into innumerable petty domains which were in constant warfare with one another. Conspiracies and parricidal exploits went on for centuries. The Tartar Invasion (1224–1237) found Russia in no condition to resist it, and for two hundred and fifty years the invaders trampled the Russians under foot, encouraging internecine war among the princes, selling for a price the thrones and lives of rulers to their less scrupulous and wealthier rivals. They humiliated the rulers by enforced

visits to pay homage to the Tartar Khans and enslaved, tortured, and massacred, the populace. Intermarriage between Russians and Tartars, both forcible and voluntary, became quite common. Asiatic customs, policies, methods of government, and criminal justice blotted out whatever Western culture had been acquired by Russia and reduced the Russians almost to the invaders' own level of barbarism. Yet in those dark times a line of shrewd princes at Moscow brought that obscure town to the forefront and made it Russia's rallying-point. From Moscow the final expedition against the Tartars was made in 1480, and their Khanates on the Volga were added to Russia some seventy years later. In 1547 John IV, the Terrible, was crowned Tsar of Russia, after more than two centuries of "gathering together of Russia" on the part of the Muscovite princes, in the course of which teachers, artisans, artists, and architects from Western Europe were brought in. In 1597 the peasants were fastened to the soil, serfdom was established, and in 1654 Little (Southern) Russia joined the realm of the Muscovite Tsars.

By the end of the seventeenth century Moscow had a large colony of foreigners skilled in all manner of trades, quartered in the so-called German (=foreign) Village, a suburb of the capital. Here Peter the Great was initiated into European military methods and the art of navigation and conceived the idea of pursuing his studies in Holland *incognito*. On his return he made up his mind "to cut a window to Europe" by founding St. Petersburg (1703) and making it his capital. Peter I ruled Russia literally with a "big stick" and forced Western European dress, customs, schools, books, as well as a reformed alphabet, upon his unwilling subjects. His final triumph over that royal knight-errant, Charles XII of Sweden, made Russia a European power to be reckoned with, and Peter assumed the title of Emperor of all the Russias. During the reigns of his female successors, German influences

were all powerful in all departments of life, but the wars with Frederick the Great brought on a reaction, and with Catherine II (1762–1796) a long line of Russian court-favorites begins. From that time Gallomania becomes rampant. The restless "Semiramis of the North" established numerous commissions for effecting radical reforms both governmental and social. She coquetted with the liberal ideas of the Encyclopedists, and carried on a voluminous correspondence with Voltaire and Diderot. No sooner had the liberal seeds begun to sprout than the Empress became reactionary in the extreme, eradicating "plots" and "revolution" with a hand that knew no mercy. But during the few liberal years of her reign Russian life pulsated with great intensity.

The Empress herself wrote more than a score of comedies, dramatic sketches, and operatic librettos, all fully national in subject and genuinely popular in language and treatment, quite a contrast to the artificial pseudo-classicism prevalent for nearly half a century. Under Alexander I (1801–1825) Russia experienced a process of liberal reforms during the first half of the reign, and rabid reaction in the latter half. During their march upon Paris and their sojourn there, in the course of the Napoleonic Wars, the Russians had absorbed too many liberal ideas to suit the victorious Emperor, and the Holy Alliance was the result. Thenceforth Russia became part and parcel of Europe in her politics and in her Literature. Nicholas I (1825–1855) still further curtailed the liberties of his subjects, but police tyranny and the censorship reached their highest point after the days of 1848. The last seven years of his reign were the "Darkest Age" of Russian Literature. The liberal beginnings of Alexander II (1855–1881) brought "the Sixties," the culminating point in Russian Literature, followed by the great movement of "going to the people" in the Seventies. Reaction of a severity almost equaling the period of 1848–1855 set in with Alexander III (1881–1894). The rule of Nicholas II, characterized by Hague

Peace Conferences before the World and "Red Sundays" at home, is of to-day and need not be dwelt upon.

Such has been Russia's history, the foundation on which its Literature was reared. The instrument in question, the Russian language, has had enough admirers to save one the delicate task of rhapsody, though a tolerable acquaintance with several modern tongues and familiarity with the languages of Greece and Rome would seem to warrant having an opinion on the subject.

Lomonosoff, "Russia's First University" in Pushkin's felicitous phrase, one of the world's few all-embracing geniuses of the type of Aristotle and Leibniz, with the gift of poetry in the bargain, says, in the Dedication of his Russian Grammar (1755): —

"Charles V, Emperor of Rome, was wont to say that it is proper to address oneself in Spanish to God, in French to friends, in German to the enemy, and in Italian to the female sex. Had he been skilled in (the knowledge of) Russian, he would doubtless have added that in the last named it behooves one to speak to all the above. For therein he would have found the magnificence of Spanish, the vivacity of French, the strength of German, the tenderness of Italian, and, besides, the opulence of Greek and Latin and their forceful gift for concise imagery. The powerful eloquence of Cicero, the magnificent stateliness of Virgil, the pleasing poesy of Ovid, do not lose their worth in Russian. The finest philosophical concepts and reasoning, the multiform properties and changes of nature occurring in this visible edifice of the universe and in the intercourse among men as well, have, in our tongue, locutions befitting and expressing the matter."

Over a hundred years later, Turgenieff, a master of the principal modern languages, thus voiced his admiration for Russian: —

"In days of doubt, in days of distressing meditations on the fate of my country, in thee alone I trust, O Russian language, great, mighty, truthful, free" . . .

"But it is impossible to believe that such a language was not given to a great people."

An opinion fully indorsed by a Frenchman, De Vogüé, who says, "The Russian Language is undoubtedly the richest of all the European tongues."

Of the three distinct varieties (into which Russian, roughly speaking, is subdivided), the "Little Russian" in the South of Russia, "White Russian" in the Western provinces bordering on Germany and around the Baltic coast, and "Great Russian" spoken in the rest of Russia by nearly seventy million souls, — this last is the literary language, the speech of Moscow being its purest form. On the other hand, St. Petersburg, from a literary point of view, is even more than the Paris of Russia, for every writer of note, no matter where born, has gravitated to the capital; and this has given an additional impulse towards a single literary language.

With these physical, historical, and political conditions, Russia presents certain special psychological characteristics which, in part at least, are the result of such conditions.

This huge expanse of earth's surface, often without a single tree for hundreds of miles, with only a carpet of grass in summer and a thick mantle of snow in winter, makes the Russian self-centered and contemplative, with a strong tendency towards the mystical, the vague, and the fantastic.

The early mingling of Slavic, Norse, and Finnish elements, centuries of Byzantine influence with its sapping of secular life to foster monastic ideals, two hundred and fifty years of Mongolian domination and intermarriage, followed by a faint taste of Italian Renaissance in the artistic labors of the Fioraventis, thereupon a forcible inoculation of Western manners and civilization by Peter I, finally to be succeeded by unbroken intercourse with Western Europe,— this process has brought it about that to-day Russia is, for the tourist, culturally (as she is geographically) the middle ground between Western Europe and Asia, and justifies to a certain degree Havelock

Ellis's characterization of Russia as the *barbarian* country in Europe, just as lately he has labeled Spain the surviving *savage* country in Europe.

The commingling of such contrasting elements has made "the Russian in reality a well-tempered alloy of the two great racial stocks, the European longheads and Asiatic broadheads," and has given him the peculiar traits that have stood him in good stead in gaining his position among the nations.

The Russian's emotional expansiveness, the recklessness with which he expresses his feelings, as shown in the habit of kissing and embracing among men (on meeting after a long separation), in his tropical enthusiasm and tears at the theater, in the whole-heartedness with which he goes in for the work he chooses — that is what most strikes a foreigner.

And with this are combined a simplicity and frankness that seem brutal to a staid Anglo-Saxon or a courtly Latin. The "broad Russian nature," a "soul wide-open" (like a door ajar), are the current phrases among the Russians themselves. To confer the highest encomium upon a man in his private or public relations is to say that he is "a man with a soul," a "soulful man," a "soul of a man."

Such simple-heartedness and sincerity make a Russian fearfully zealous in his ideals. He accepts ideas no matter by whom propounded, and immediately makes them a part of himself. As Brandes says: —

> "The cultivated Russian understands and always has understood the living, the new, the newest in foreign countries, and does not wait till it becomes cheap because it is old or has gained currency by the approbation of the stranger's countrymen. The Russian catches the new thought on the wing. Their culture makes a modern race, with the keenest scent for everything modern."

Having once made an idea or ideal his own, a Russian will unfalteringly carry it to its bitter end. He will not yield even in the face of its *reductio ad absurdum*.

It is this devotion to ideals that has caused tens of thousands of the flower of Russian youth to leave their kindred and homes and "go to the people," live and work among and for the peasants, share their simple fare, their joys and their sorrows, and give their lives in the prisons, in Siberia and on the gallows, with a stoicism and martyr's exaltation, that have aroused the wonder of the civilized world. But it is also this same devotion to ideals that makes the tender-hearted Russian unhesitatingly shoot down men by the hundreds, when these men happen to be among those who misrule Russia. To the unthinking it may seem a cruelty incompatible with that almost feminine tenderness. But who would deny the tender love of Brutus for Cæsar and the logic of his arguments for killing Cæsar?

Altruism and a burning zeal combine into a well-defined sense of responsibility which becomes almost oppressive. It makes the Russian youth mature early and age too soon.

On the one hand an ardent love for one's fellow-beings, on the other the iron hand of an autocratic government; the outbursts of hopeful youth countered by the fury of merciless repression, — there is the environment which explains the apparently causeless oscillation between hopefulness and pessimism, unbridled merriment and fathomless grief, which lies in the make-up of every Russian. That master of Russian character, Pushkin, sang more than seventy years ago: —

"Something kindred, dear is sounded,
In my coachman's songs unending:
Now 'tis merriment unbounded,
Then again 'tis grief heart-rending,"

and elsewhere: —

"How sadly sings the Russian Maiden,
Like our Muse, a songstress sorrow-laden.
. . . All our race,
From coachman to the foremost poet,

We all sing dolefully. A dismal whine
A Russian's song is, ever know it;
Begins: "Your health!" a funeral dirge in fine.
Though Muse and Maid sing mournfully,
I like their plaintive melody."

Clearly, as has been said, "the Russians are radicals in everything, in faith and infidelity, in love and hate, in submission and rebellion."

In analyzing "De Rerum Natura" Professor Mackail states that with Lucretius "the joy and glory of his art come second to his passionate love of truth, and the deep moral purport of what he believes to be the one true message for mankind. . . . His mission . . . is that light of truth which is "clearer than the beams of the sun or the shining shafts of day."

"A Roman aristocrat, living among a highly cultivated society, Lucretius had been yet endowed by nature with the primitive instincts of the savage. He sees the ordinary processes of everyday life — weaving, carpentry, metal-working, even such specialized forms of manual art as the polishing of the surface of marble — with the fresh eye of one who sees them all for the first time. Nothing is to him indistinct through familiarity. In virtue of this absolute clearness of vision it costs him no effort to throw himself back into prehistoric conditions and the wild life of the earliest men."

Almost two thousand years after Lucretius, history has repeated itself in the case of the Russian writers. They have brought to their task the same passionate love of truth and the savage's clearness of vision in approaching the phenomena of human life they chose to deal with; qualities just as precious in their way as the ancient Greek's *Forschungsgeist* — the craving for investigation (if this free rendering may be pardoned), and his unfailing sense of artistic proportion.

This is what made Russian authors realists κατ' ἐξοχήν, what gave Russia a naturalist school in Literature decades before anybody in Western Europe had ever thought of realism or naturalism. Whether it was due to his superior quali-

fication for the special end in view, or precisely because his mind was untutored and unsophisticated and therefore unspoiled, makes no difference for the point in hand. The fact remains that a Russian writer could no more help seeing life and action exactly as they were, and then depicting them as he saw them, than a Greek could help expressing himself in art with a wonderful sense of proportion.

Add to these traits the Russian's innate emotionality and you have the basis of the all-pervading humanity of Russian Literature as a whole, its *teaching mission,* or "pity" as it has often been called, which must not be confounded with didacticism. A comparison of the works of the modern Russian writers with the realistic productions of their French rivals will make the matter quite clear. The Frenchmen, in developing their negative characters, and following up the succession of their psychological states with the minutest details, give one the impression of delivering a prosecuting-attorney's speech in court; they have no sympathy with their characters of non-heroic stamp, they bring up all those wonderfully wrought out protocol minutiæ only the more effectively to draw a crushing verdict from their readers.

To the Russian authors, on the other hand, the famous line of Terence —

> Homo sum: humani nihil a me alienum puto —
> "I am a man: I deem nothing human foreign to me" —

is the principle *par excellence;* it is their chief and moving spirit. People with weak wills, with high-strung nerves, affected by the many other maladies of the day, are not looked down upon, but evoke the heart-felt pity of the author, who sees in them but incomplete portions of human beings as designed by their Creator, members of society crippled by the vagaries of the private, social, and political life of our times. It is this quality that made Gogol consider that the greatest merit of his work consisted in the fact that "he surveyed all this hugely

rushing life, through laughter seen by the world and *tears invisible and unknown to it.*" It is this quality again that moved a foreign critic to say that Tolstoy "possesses the skill of an English chemist with the soul of a Hindu Buddhist."

To what extraordinary lengths this gift of sympathy with the characters depicted, of placing themselves so to speak in their heroes' skin, can go with the Russian writers, may be gathered from the following anecdote, sufficiently attested to be quoted here.

"One dreary winter day Tolstoy and Turgenieff, in their aimless rambles, came upon a broken-down old horse waiting for its driver, in the piercing cold. Tolstoy walked over to the horse and tenderly patting the shivering animal, depicted its pedigree, past history, and its feelings at the moment, in a few masterly strokes, with such power, boundless love and compassion, that Turgenieff half-jokingly burst out: 'Lyoff Nikolayevich! you surely must have had several generations of horses among your ancestors, for otherwise you could not feel so deeply for this horse.'"

This was the secret mainspring that enabled Tolstoy (in common with the other great Russian writers) to depict with equal facility, sureness of touch and unerring power, all kinds of characters: children, adults, and old folk; men and women in all walks of life, from rulers of nations, through ministers, statesmen, courtiers, great noblemen and clergymen, down to the smallest prison official who can be bought with a pound of sugar; the martyrs of the Russian revolution and its dungeon-keepers, executioners, and hardened jailbirds; the most ideal representatives of Russian womanhood and the women of the gutter.

But this altruism in dealing with others makes them just as cruel in dealing with themselves (in their remorseless self-analysis and self-criticism) as they are tender in dealing with others, for in depicting in both cases with equal fidelity to actual life, they are drawn by their extreme idealism to

explain away the faults of others while scourging themselves for the same.

A gang of convicts, with many a murderer and hardened criminal among them, on the foot-wearying tramp to Siberia evoke nothing but the most effusive outbursts of sympathy (often taking the material shape of donations in money, clothes, and provisions) on the part of the villagers by the road. Yet those same peasants, after committing a crime, will in most cases, under the stress of awakened conscience, rush to the market-place to make a clean breast of it before the whole community, pleading with the fellow-villagers to shower abuse and blows on them as sinners unworthy of their God's image.

But no matter how strongly marked these humane tendencies might be, they would probably remain isolated cases, if there had been no conscious striving after definite ideals, had they not been enthroned as principles that should be the beacon lights of the advanced writers among the Russians.

True, Dyerzhavin's (1743–1816) whole claim to immortality was based on being the bard of Catherine II's achievements: —

> "I shall extol, I shall proclaim thee,
> Through thee immortal be myself,"

but he also takes credit for

> "With a smile telling the truth to Tsars."

As for Pushkin, who as a lad wrote —

> "The old Dyerzhavin us has noticed,
> And on the brink of grave has blessed,"

he has entirely different claims. He, whom partisans of "Art for Art's sake," "pure Art," etc., proclaimed their ideal and idol, — he will have his imperishable monument for this reason: —

> "And of my people I long for this shall be beloved
> That kindly feelings with my lyre I used to wake;
> That by the vivid charm of verses I was useful
> And mercy to the fallen I invoked."

It is on the invoking of "mercy to the fallen," the "waking of kindly feelings," the actual "usefulness" of his poetry, that Pushkin bases his claims to immortality.

In another poem, "The Echo," he distinctly lays it down as the poet's duty to vibrate in consonance with the multitudinous events of life, even though himself receiving no response from any one: —

THE ECHO

"There roars a beast in forest's gloom,
Or horn blares, or thunders boom,
Or maiden sings beyond the holm; —
To every tone
Thy answer in air's vacant dome,
Thou dost intone.

"Thou hearkenst to the thunders gruff,
The voice of storm and waves far-off,
And shout of rustic shepherds rough; —
Comes answer back.
But thou gett'st none. As badly off
A bard's, alack!"

And this is the keynote of Russian Literature and literary criticism. Every Russian author of note has distinctly stated that his literary work is but a means for a certain well-defined purpose, a straight aiming at a sturdy reality, not a blind groping after vague and diffuse ideals.

The faltering verse of Russia's first would-be poet, Kantemir (1708–1744), becomes a social satire against the senseless opposition to the reforms of Peter the Great. The odes of Lomonosoff (1711–1765) attain a genuine poetic ring when dealing with the value of knowledge for benighted Russia. The comedies of Fonvizin (1745–1792), the first artistic creations (along with their lesser contemporary achievements by Catherine II) on truly Russian lines, scourge the excesses of

worshiping foreign manners and customs, and plead for the national simplicity of olden days.

Griboyedoff (1795–1829), in his "Misfortune from Intelligence," that heart-rending cry of a man that loved his country only too well, had for his direct object to combat the baneful influence of the fad for aping everything French.

Lermontoff (1814–1841) forges his deadliest darts, pours out the fiercest venom of his "iron verse, suffused with bitterness and anger," against the triviality and shallowness of the society of his time. The Eternal Judge has given him the omniscience of a prophet: —

> "Of love and truth I then commenced
> To herald undefiled teachings;
> Then all my fellow-men incensed,
> At me stones hurled for my preachings."

At eighteen, Gogol (1809–1852) writes in his letters: "I have consecrated my whole life to doing good," "all my powers to nothing but the advantage of the fatherland," "almost since the age of mental immaturity I burned with the unquenchable zeal of making my life indispensable for the welfare of the State; I eagerly sought to contribute the slightest benefit whatever."

Turgenieff (1818–1883), "the Westerner," whom Taine considered "one of the most perfect artists the world has produced since the classic period," on the very threshold of his literary career takes his Hannibalian oath never to make peace with his "enemy," to fight to a finish that enemy — the institution of serfdom — and actually leaves Russia the more effectively to strike his blows. His "Annals of a Sportsman" (1847–1851), an infinitely superior artistic achievement to "Uncle Tom's Cabin," produced the effect aimed at by the author. Alexander II, who avowed the strong impression Turgenieff's sketches had made on him, emancipated the serfs in 1861.

Tolstoy (1828–1910), in the early fifties, when an author was safe from the rigors of reprisals only in the realm of "pure Art," proclaims in a personal outpouring, "I shall write, but not as you do, for I know *wherefore* I shall write."

His "Sebastopol" sketches conclude as follows: "Where is the embodiment of evil which is to be avoided? Where, in this story, is the embodiment of good which is to be imitated? Who is its villain and who the hero? All are good and all are bad. But the hero of my story whom I love with all the powers of my soul, whom I have striven to reproduce in all his beauty and who always has been, is, and will be beautiful, is truth."

Or elsewhere, in the preface which Tolstoy wrote for the Russian translation of Amiel's "Journal": "For we love and need an author only in proportion as he reveals to us the inner process of his soul, of course if this process is new and has not been gone through before. Whatever he may write — a play, scientific work, novel, philosophical treatise, lyric poem, critique, satire — what is dear to us in the writer's work is but this inner working of his soul and not the architectural edifice, into which most of the time (and I even think, always) he lays his maimed thought and feeling."

As for the folk-novel movement of the period of "going to the people," suffice it to quote a letter of Ryeshetnikoff (1841–1871) to Nyekrasoff: "I conceived the idea of describing the life of the *burlaks* (bargemen on the Volga) in order that I might, even in the slightest degree, help these poor toilers."

It may be pointed out here that this view had permeated all branches of Russian art at the time. Thus the composer Dargomyzhski wrote in 1857: "I have no intention to degrade music to the level of a pastime. I want the sound to express the word directly. I want truth." He strove for the impression of truth and realistic representation, while Musorgski, the follower of this "great teacher of musical truth," laid this down as the articles of his own realistic faith: "artistic rep-

resentation of material beauty is childishness, the infantile age of Art"; "Art is a medium of communion with mankind, not its aim."

Thus whether in the jeremiads of Radishcheff against serfdom or in Fonvizin's and Griboyedoff's satires on the stupid mania for imitating foreign manners, or Gogol's scourging of official corruption from lowest to highest, or Turgenieff's pleading for the serfs, or the whole folk-novel movement in behalf of the starving emancipated peasants, or Tolstoy's glorification of the common people (and in his actual teachings), or Dostoyefski's plea for the humble, the downtrodden, and the criminals, or Gorki's appeals for the outcast and the tramp, Russian Literature has been faithful to its mission: to direct the minds of its readers for the betterment of Russian society as a whole by bettering the lot of those who most urgently need it, to tell the unvarnished truth in describing Russian life.

Owing to the extraordinary conditions of Russian political and social life, with its argus-eyed censors and dreadful system of espionage, Literature has by force of circumstances become the only means, the exclusive arena for struggle against the evils of Russian political, economic, and social life. Even the establishment of a free school is strongly objected to by the government and implies untold difficulties. Tolstoy's pedagogic labors in Yasnaya Polyana had been made the subject of an especial investigation with a view to finding traces of revolutionary activity. Through certain circumstances, however, Tolstoy went unmolested and was even commended where thousands of others were visited with exile or imprisonment.

In this its special mission, Literature in the narrower sense of belles-lettres was powerfully supported by all the advanced Russian literary critics who took their cue from the great authors of Russia. Thus the interdependence between Literature and life, and the function of Literature as a disseminator of

the tenets of the advanced minds in Russia, soon became the Russian literary critics' profession of faith. A literary production was judged not from a purely literary point of view, but according as it furthered or retarded social progress, as it served to help the attainment of the social and ethical ideals of society. A work would be condemned unhesitatingly if it lost connection with life by tearing itself away into the regions of Art for Art's sake.

Here one might say that the Russian's well-known idealism apparently runs counter to his uncompromising realism in Literature. But this contradiction is only surface deep; the Russian sees everything with the eyes of a thoroughgoing realist, but back of it all is a higher purpose, the realism becomes handmaid of a high ideal: to advance social progress, to better the lot of the unfortunate.

Naturally, in the clash and turmoil of several generations of opposing views, many a writer or critic has gone to the absurd limits of his pet theories, the more so when we bear in mind that the Russian nature tends to run to extremes.

Thus, on the one hand, Pisareff (1840–1868), a critic who swayed the minds of Russian youth during the Sixties, proclaimed the ancillary office of Literature by pushing his utilitarian theories to the point of declaring that all the works of a second-rate poet are not worth a pair of boots, the labor of a plodding cobbler. And years before Ibsen had disowned verse for the purposes of drama, the great satirist Shchedrin, himself guilty of riding Pegasus in his younger days, declared, in a moment of exasperation, that those who wrote verse seemed to him lunatics trying to walk along a string stretched on the floor, and half sitting down at each step.

On the other hand, a whole group of poets, under the reactionary pressure of Nicholas I's reign preached "Art for Art's sake," and their most characteristic representative, Fet, who hymned abstract beauty untiringly for over half a century, was the most hard-handed among the many Russian hard-

handed masters in dealing with his peasants and in his frequent polemic writings on this subject. The mere fact that they preached pure Art, that they kept aloof from life's stern realities, made such preachers advocates of the existing order in the eyes of all those who felt the weight of governmental oppression. Thus the view, that the realistic school of writers stood for progress and light and the partisans of "pure Art" were allies of the forces of darkness and reaction, was only strengthened.

While these two currents of literary thought and ideals have to a certain degree existed side by side, they really carried on a ceaseless struggle for supremacy. But with each successive swing of the pendulum the ethical school, with its altruistic teachings of love for the "lesser brother," invariably gathered more and more force at the expense of the school of pure art. The victories of the former ever represent the culminating points in the history of Russian letters; the latter as unfailingly mark the gloomiest periods in the reigns of a succession of gloomy autocrats. There is a throbbing joy of life, a hopefulness and vigor throughout the length and breadth of Russian Literature, when the ethical cause is predominant; there is marked melancholy, pessimism almost bordering on despair, when "pure Art" sends forth its full bloom.

But with all this Russian Literature has mirrored every shade of the literary movements of Western Europe. For have we not seen that the Russian possesses to an extraordinary degree, the capacity for grasping new ideas immediately upon coming into contact with them, and also the power of adapting and adopting, appropriating them at once?

And thus it is that the Russians were pseudo-classicists in the middle of the eighteenth century, were Encyclopedists (as, for example, in Catherine II) with Voltaire and Diderot, wept tears of sentimentalism with Karamzin (1766–1826)

over the novels of Richardson and Sterne, grew violent romanticists when Byron was the undisputed overlord over the minds of Pushkin and the youthful Lermontoff, became *plus royalistes que le roi* over Hegelian dialectics, with the famous "all that which exists is reasonable," in the Thirties and early Forties, then Darwinists and positivists and Spencerians and Schopenhauerians and symbolists and Nietzscheans and even, at last, decadents with a faint touch of pornography to boot, all in turn (at times somewhat behindhand) as these movements succeeded one another in the thought of Western Europe. But all these numerous intellectual shades of opinion were almost immediately recreated and incorporated into the peculiarly national psychology of the Russian, with its sober realism of manner and high idealism of thought. The history of Russian Literature is thus at the same time the history of Russian thought.

Thus the saying current in Russia, that "the Frenchman will hit upon an invention, the Englishman will manufacture it, the German will import it into Russia for sale, and the Russian will come and steal it," has been shown to be true in other fields than industry. But the process has been much more than mere appropriation. It has been a laborious and painstaking process of transmutation and fusion. It has been a gathering of threads of somber color and bright color, garish and subdued, and weaving them into one majestic tapestry of a wonderful design and charming the sense of vision with the beauty of its composition and the harmonious blending of all the tints and shades of the rainbow.

It has been a fructifying process *par ecxellence*, not of cramming only or even of assimilation, whereby Russia has returned a hundred fold for what it has borrowed.

Some of the most prominent writers of France, England, Germany, Italy, Spain, and America, of the last quarter of a century, have been more or less the product of the school of writing as exemplified in the works of Turgenieff, Dostoyefski,

and Tolstoy, and Bourget, Maupassant, James, Howells, Hauptmann, and D'Annunzio, to name but a few of a host, have clearly shown or expressly acknowledged their indebtedness to the Russian literary masters.

It is idle and perniciously misleading therefore to assert that Russian Literature has nothing original in it (as has been done in a curiously biased "History of Russian Literature," by K. Waliszewski, 1900), for "does it detract a whit from the quality of the magnificent ruby, when we are told that the element of which it is formed is a colored variety of corundum or alumina," actually the most abundant of the earths?

As for the future of Russian Literature, it of course is in the lap of the gods along with the future of Russia.

In order to avoid the perils of prophecy and to let a non-Russian, who is more competent in that sphere, pronounce upon the question of Russia's future, I shall conclude with these words of Havelock Ellis: —

"Russia at the present time is a vast laboratory for the experimental manufacture of the greatest European and Asiatic nation, fated to mold, as much probably as any nation, the future of the world. Such a process is always going on everywhere at some stage of acuteness, but in the rest of Europe the formative stage in the growth of peoples has long gone by, and while it lasted there were few or none able and competent to observe it. In Russia we see the process in its most acute form. This enormous birth-rate, this death-rate so enormous as sometimes to equal the births, this creation of human beings on so vast a scale and the testing and proving of them in the most trying of climates — in this great experimental operation Nature is, on the whole, still left to attain her own results in her own way. In such an acute and destructive process of natural selection, not only are the weakest lost, but a certain number of human failures are necessarily left. Thus there are neurotic and degenerate elements in all classes of society, though, as the comparative harmlessness of Russian criminality and the

absence of the physical signs of degeneracy clearly indicate, the process of selection on the whole works truly. The Russian pessimist and the hostile foreigner see nothing but decadence. The thoughtful observer knows that such decadence is but the inevitable by-product in the formative process of a great nation."

"Beyond any other European people the Russians possess a degree of receptivity, a radical humanity of feeling, a fund of high idealism, and a sense of the relationship of ideals to practical life, which cannot fail to carry them very far. These things, far more than either an outrageous militarism or the capacity for frantic industrial production, in the end make up civilization."